

## **Airmobile Operations**

### **The 1st Cavalry Division's Exploitation of Helicopters in the Ia Drang Valley**

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In the late 1950s and early 1960s, a few thoughtful and farsighted U.S. Army officers began integrating Army aviation into battlefield maneuver. Rooted in the airborne concepts and techniques of World War II and driven by advances in helicopter development during and after the Korean War, military planners created new principles that combined light infantry, supporting artillery, and aviation to generate maximum shock power and maneuver on the modern battlefield. These planners, as part of two boards, reviewed Army aviation requirements and developed concepts pivotal to the evolution of airmobile operations. Lieutenant General Gordon B. Rogers chaired the first board, the Army Aircraft Requirements Review Board. The Rogers Board, formed in early 1960, reviewed the Army Aircraft Development Plan, discussed roles and missions of Army aviation, assessed combat surveillance requirements, and detailed procurement plans. In addition to making recommendations on observation, surveillance, and transportation aircraft, the Rogers Board recommended an in-depth study be conducted to explore the concept and feasibility of air-fighting units. The Rogers Board also provided essential aviation guidance for development, procurement, and personnel planning.

On taking office in 1961, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara believed that more could and should be done in the areas of Army aircraft development and the adaptation of airmobile capabilities. In April 1962, McNamara formed an ad hoc task force to reexamine aircraft requirements and the role of Army aviation. The U.S. Army Tactical Mobility Requirements Board, known as the Howze Board after its president, Lieutenant General Hamilton H. Howze, investigated, tested, and evaluated the organizational and operational concepts of airmobility. The board concluded that the "adoption of the Army of the Airmobile Concept-however imperfectly it may be described and justified in this report-is necessary and desirable. In some respect the transition is inevitable, just as was that from animal mobility to motor."

The board recommended the creation of an air assault division with 459 aircraft as compared to about 100 in a standard division. The new division, the 11th Air Assault Division, tested the airmobile concept, and its deployment to Vietnam in September 1965 as the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) changed the way U.S. forces conducted land warfare. The use of helicopters for reconnaissance, command and control, troop transport, attack gunships, aerial rocket artillery, medical evacuation, and supply was tantamount to a revolution in maneuver.

The 1st Cavalry Division was not the first U.S. combat unit to fight in an airmobile role. In fact, combat helicopters were used as early as December 1961. In 1965, a Marine contingent and the Army's 173d Airborne Brigade and 2d Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, were deployed to Vietnam. Furthermore, while the 1st Cavalry Division was the first airmobile division, it was not the only division to use airmobile techniques. Airmobile operations occurred in Vietnam on a daily basis. That conflict is replete with examples of airmobile operations, from the smallest-using 2 or 3 helicopters to insert long-range recon-naissance patrols or Special Forces teams-to

multidivisional operations like Junction City-where over 249 helicopters were used to make 8 battalion-size airmobile assaults. But as author Shelby Stanton maintains, “No single engagement demonstrated the basic validity of air assault as strikingly as the 1st Cavalry Division’s Ia Drang Valley Campaign.” Now, whole divisions were no longer constrained by the tyranny of terrain.

In the Ia Drang Valley or Pleiku campaign, the newly arrived 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) used its air assault assets to locate and battle North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars on the Pleiku plateau in South Vietnam’s central highlands. In this series of engagements, an NVA regular division met a U.S. Army airmobile division on the battlefield for the first time.

To facilitate making contact with the enemy, the 1st Cavalry Division was positioned at An Khe in the central highlands. In the 37-day campaign, 1st Cavalry helicopters moved infantry battalions twenty-two times and displaced artillery batteries sixty-six times across distances of up to seventy-five miles. In addition, helicopters trans-ported troops over difficult terrain and enemy defenses and conducted raids, reconnaissance, and screening.

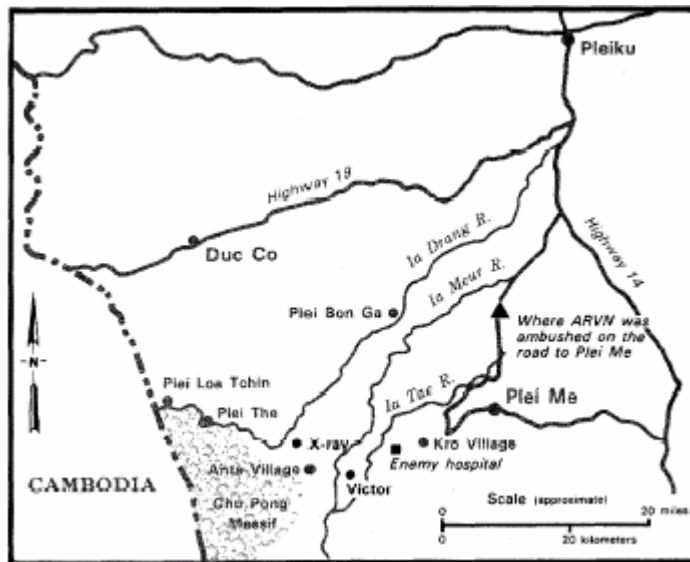
The NVA initiated the campaign with a major offensive in the western plateau of the highlands in Kontum, Pleiku, Binh Dinh, and Phu Bon Provinces. Three regular NVA regiments under the control of a division-size field front headquarters were to destroy the Plei Me, Dak Sut, and Due Co Special Forces camps and the South Vietnamese’Le Thanh district headquarters. Finally, the offensive would seize Pleiku, virtually cutting the south in half. The NVA 32d and 33d Regiments initiated the action on 19 October with a favorite NVA “lure and ambush” technique, laying siege to the camp at Plei Me and waiting to ambush an Army of the Republic of Vietnam relief column. With the help of 1st Cavalry’s artillery and close air support, however, neither the siege nor the ambush was successful, and the mauled NVA regiments withdrew west toward Cambodia and their base camps at the foot of the Chu Pong massif. In pursuit, the U.S. Army committed its airmobile division.

On orders, elements of the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, and supporting units fanned west toward Cambodia in search of the elusive enemy. Scout helicopters and gunships searched the terrain, strafing those small groups of fleeing NVA soldiers they were able to spot. On 1 November, aerial scouts of the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, spotted a band of enemy soldiers and assaulted them with aerorifle platoons. After a brief skirmish, the scouts uncovered a fully stocked regimental hospital. Later that afternoon, aided by gunships from the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, three rifle platoons at the hospital site held off an entire NVA battalion for six hours. Using intelligence gathered at the hospital, the 1st Squadron set several traps two days later, successfully ambushing elements of the NVA 66th Regiment. Later, during an NVA counterattack, U.S. units employed aerial rocket artillery for the first time at night in a close support role.

For the next week, fighting was sporadic. U.S. forces identified and located the NVA 33d and 66th Regiments, but the 32d’s location was still in doubt. After searching the area for twelve days, the U.S. 1st Brigade, on 9 November, turned over the search to the 3d Brigade. On 14 November, the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, spearheaded by elements of the reconnaissance squadron, searched the area near the Ia Drang River around the Chu Pong massif, hoping for a possible airmobile assault against the NVA. The 1st Battalion was supported by sixteen lift

helicopters and fire support from two 105mm howitzer batteries at Landing Zone (LZ) Falcon, nine kilometers east of the search area. However, one battery was not airlifted to LZ Falcon until the morning of the 14th.

At dawn on 14 November, Lieutenant Colonel Harold G. Moore, commander of the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, reconnoitered the eastern side of the Chu Pong massif in a scout helicopter, looking for likely landing zones. He chose a clearing at the base of the massif (later designated LZ X-ray) because it was large enough to land eight to ten helicopters (see map 2). Moore wanted to airland the first company, consolidate it, and then land the entire battalion. After returning to his base camp at Plei Me, Moore briefed his company commanders



Map 2. The area around LZ X-ray

and, in keeping with standard airmobile doctrine, arranged for artillery preparation fires on X-ray to begin twenty minutes before his troops would touch down. This artillery preparation was to be followed immediately by a thirty-second aerial rocket artillery barrage. Then, escort gunships would sweep the landing area with fire seconds before the troop-carrying Hueys were to land.

Moore designated 1030 as the LZ touchdown time for the initial assault landing. The artillery fires, however, did not begin until 1017, delayed by the faulty positioning of LZ Falcon's artillery. After thirteen minutes of artillery preparation, sixteen Hueys loaded with the lead elements of Moore's battalion headed southwest toward LZ X-ray. As the transports approached within two kilometers of the landing zone, aerial rocket artillery pounded the site for thirty seconds, followed by fire from escort gunships. The helicopters immediately ahead of the low-level troop carriers flew racetrack patterns on either flank, raking the landing zone with machine-gun and rocket fire. As helicopters slowed for touchdown, their door gunners and on-board infantrymen fired into the grass and trees on X-ray's perimeter.

The helicopters landed the lead element of B Company, 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, and, by 1050, were returning to Plei Me for the remainder of B Company and lead elements of A Company. Unfortunately, the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, landed right in the middle of the NVA staging area for a planned second attack on Plei Me. The NVA forces were eager to fight. Once consolidated,

B Company began patrolling and came under heavy enemy fire that continued for the next three days.

Sixteen helicopters in five succeeding lifts airlanded battalion elements at LZ X-ray. A Company followed B Company unopposed into the landing zone, and the perimeter expanded. C Company arrived next, with little opposition, but as the helicopters airlanded D Company, they took numerous hits. The enemy killed one infantryman before he could dismount and wounded two helicopter crewmen. Moore radioed the second flight of eight helicopters to turn back until LZ X-ray could be stabilized. Supported by artillery, air strikes from the Air Force, and division gunships, the battalion had airlanded into X-ray by 1500.

According to airmobile doctrine, reserve forces must be able to reinforce quickly should assaulting units be unknowingly inserted too close to larger enemy formations. At LZ X-ray, the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, faced elements of the NVA 33d and 66th Regiments. But because the 3d Brigade was involved in ongoing search operations and its units were too widely scattered, only B Company, 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, was available to reinforce the 1st Battalion. By 1900 that evening, B Company had been inserted into LZ X-ray, while the remainder of the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, and the 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry, gathered at two different landing zones and prepared to reinforce the morning of the 15th. These units had been held back on 14 November to protect them from intense enemy fire. Throughout the 14th, 1st Battalion's S3, in a command and control helicopter, circled over X-ray monitoring the tactical situation and relaying information to the brigade. At the same time, the 1st Battalion's artillery and tactical air control liaison officers directed artillery fire and air strikes on the NVA. Meanwhile, departing helicopters evacuated casualties from LZ X-ray to LZ Falcon for treatment and further evacuation. Just before dark, helicopters resupplied troops with ammunition, rations, medical supplies, and water.

The NVA harassed and probed LZ X-ray's perimeter all night, but 4,000 rounds of artillery fired from LZ Falcon kept the enemy at bay. After first light on 15 November, the NVA made a desperate bid to annihilate the Americans. At 0800, the U.S. 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry, marched overland from LZ Victor to reinforce the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, at LZ X-ray. At 0900, A Company, 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, airlanded at LZ X-ray and became embroiled in the fight. By 1000, concentrated U.S. artillery and air strikes blunted the NVA attack, and only sporadic sniper fire continued. Shortly before noon, the lead elements of the 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry, came under heavy enemy automatic weapons fire 800 meters outside of LZ X-ray's perimeter. After the 2d Battalion quelled that resistance, the fight at X-ray was over, despite continued sniper fire and several company-size probes during the night.

By dawn on 16 November, enemy attacks had run their course. Still wary of the enemy situation, however, Moore ordered intense firing on the NVA, which not only netted several NVA snipers but also broke up a platoon-size enemy attack that was about to begin. By 0930, the remainder of the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, arrived at LZ X-ray, and B Company and the 3d Platoon, A Company, 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, moved back to the division base camp for a much-needed rest and reorganization.

The 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry, and the remainder of the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, held LZ X-ray for another night and then abandoned it on 17 November to allow B-52s to strike the area. The 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry, moved to LZ Columbus, and the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, moved to LZ Albany, both to the east, to be airlifted out. The move to LZ Columbus went without a hitch, but as the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, approached LZ Albany, it triggered an NVA ambush that struck the battalion in the flank and split it in half. The battle disintegrated into skirmishes and hand-to-hand fighting between splintered groups. The fighting continued until evening when reinforcements finally were able to reach the scene. The battle continued throughout the night, inflicting heavy casualties on the Americans. But as daylight approached, the NVA retreated. With the end of action at LZ Albany, the Ia Drang Valley campaign ended. In the Ia Drang campaign, the 1st Cavalry Division annihilated two regular 'North Vietnamese Army' regiments (which had to be completely reformed in Cambodia) and validated the U.S. Army's concept of airmobile warfare. From that point on, airmobility would remain a major instrument of war employed by the United States and other countries.

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